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The Games of Rome

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The Games of Rome

by LAURA WEBBER

The crowd around her tensed and surged like a living organism. Every strike drew gasps and jeers from the rioting mob. It didn't matter whose blood was shed for screams to echo around the Flavian Amphitheatre. The more damaging the blow was, the louder the audience cheered. As the most recent warrior fell to the champion Kenetheus, the crowd roared to a level that had been unheard thus far in the games.

Barbaria watched the games with mild contempt showing in her wide blue eyes, but her gut tightened as more and more battles were waged. She dared not show her emotions; one never knew who was watching. It would endanger her family's standing and her life to show her attachment to the gladiator fighting for his life on the ground below. Worse, it could make Kenetheus's situation graver than it already was. With one match remaining, she turned away. She could not watch any longer.

"Barbaria, come," her father, Decius, said. "You must meet Marcellus. He is very powerful, and if he takes an interest in you, I might be able to finally gain favor in the Senate."

Barbaria was ushered to one of her slaves to have the jewels in her dark hair rearranged and her silky turquoise palla straightened so her chest was uncovered. By order of Decius, every stola she owned had been altered to show her to her best advantage. Barbaria understood what this really meant: she was shown to her father's best advantage. It had been many years since she saw herself as anything but a doll in her father's house.

Sometimes she wondered what her life would be like if she were disfigured or scarred. Perhaps her life would be her own. Instead, she had blemish-free skin and possessed the ideal female shape, at least according to the upper echelons of society — an impossibly thin waist, large breasts, hair that was long and thick, and hips that showed her ability to bear a child. As she looked around at the crowd of plebeians, she found herself envious. They were all so free; no controlling father was selling the girl with the birthmark on her bared left breast to the most powerful politician. That girl's life didn't revolve around climbing the social ladder. She could love anyone she wanted; she could be with anyone she loved. Even if that person were a mere gladiator.

"Ah, Marcellus. Welcome!" Decius's exclamation brought her back from her musings. "You've arrived just in time to watch the last of the games with me and my daughter. Have you met Barbaria? Come, daughter."

Marcellus executed a slight bow. "Milady," he said. She nodded in return. "It is a pleasure to meet such a beautiful specimen of womanhood, even if it is among this dirty society today."

The man towering above her was pleasing to the eyes. His dark hair was shorn close to his head, and his toga did nothing to hide his strong physique. However, Barbaria was not impressed. He did not have the bulging muscles that she had come to admire, his body was unmarked by scars showing any fighting prowess, and his expression was far too arrogant to be appealing to her. If he had graying hair and a slightly rounded stomach, she thought he could be her father — a thought that made Marcellus revolting. Barbaria did not want to go from being one man's doll straight to holding the same role in another's life.

"Senator," Barbaria replied after a pause. "The pleasure of our meeting is all mine. How are you enjoying the games today?"

"Oh, they are splendid," Marcellus said. "The gladiators are such barbarians, simple though they are. Your father's warriors are truly the best of the Roman Empire."

Bile rose in Barbaria's throat. She used to have the same opinion, but knowing what she knew now — who she knew now — forced her to contradict his opinion, knowing she would inspire the wrath of her father.

"You think them simple? It is not their choice to be fighting. You do not think most would want to work at something other than fighting for their lives and our pleasure?"

Marcellus did not answer her queries right away. Instead, he just looked at her with a condescending smirk on his otherwise attractive face. He cast a glance toward Decius, his eyes bright with laughter at her opinion. Laughter at her.

"Oh Barbaria, how charming your sentiments are. Such a soft, feminine ideal. Decius, you must find great enjoyment in your daughter's silly views."

"Indeed I do," Decius replied, his eyes tense and watchful. Barbaria knew by the tightening in his brow that she would be lectured upon their return to her father's villa. "Look, I believe my champion's last match is about to end. Shall we return to watching?"

Barbaria submitted to her father's change of subject and dropped the conversation. She turned to Marcellus. "Senator, would you like to stand with me over here? I have had an excellent view of the fights."

As they turned to watch the gladiators battle, Barbaria saw Kenetheus glance her direction while his sword cut through his opponent's neck as if it were butter.

"Barbaria!" Decius's shout echoed through the villa. He stormed around his study while she stood frozen near the door. "What were you thinking? You're lucky he found you amusing, for if you had ruined your chances with him, my chance at politics would have been destroyed! If you don't cooperate next time, I will make you disappear."

Barbaria stayed silent throughout his speech, not really paying attention after

the first sentences. This was the first time that she had done something that went against her father's wishes. It was quite freeing, really. She kept her eyes on the floor so Decius wouldn't notice her lack of attention as she played mindlessly with the edge of her palla.

Decius had lowered his voice, recapturing her attention. "Where did you get these notions? You despised the gladiators in years past; I recall you saying they were just dirty slaves."

Barbaria panicked. Her father didn't know that she had gone down to his ludus and met his gladiators. He was unaware of how often she had snuck away to visit his champion, the man who treated her as a human and an equal. She knew that to tell her father of her relationship with Kenetheus would result in the gladiator's death, yet she knew not what to say in response.

"I cannot say, Father," she replied, hoping to fool him. "It must have been Marcellus. Something about him caused me to rebel."

"Well make sure it doesn't occur again. I'll not have you destroying this family, destroying my future, with your uncontrolled emotions. Now leave me," Decius said as he turned toward the window. Barbaria acquiesced before he could think of another word to say.

Pulling her woolen palla around her and over her head, Barbaria slipped out a side door of the villa. The dark purple color of the palla she had chosen would work in her favor as she made her way toward her father's ludus, the home and training site of all his gladiators, as the sun slipped beyond the horizon. If she hurried, she could catch the guard who was infatuated with her — he always let her down into the tunnels after she fluttered her eyelashes and slipped a denarius into his purse.

She waited in the shadows, watching the passersby until the road was relatively clear. Fate was in her favor; it was the guard that she wished to see, and it was easier than usual to be admitted into the bowels of the arena. With every quiet step she took toward Kenetheus, her heart felt lighter.

Barbaria rounded the last corner, and there he was. Resting his elbows on his folded legs, he looked serene — a sharp contrast to the violence of just hours before. She let herself into the cell, careful not to draw extra attention to herself. Kenetheus lifted his head, looking at her with warm blue eyes, a fresh cut stretched across his left cheek.

"My love, this will be the last time we must meet like this," Barbaria said with a smile. "These last denarii should give you enough to finally buy your freedom from my father."

"Your father still suspects nothing of you?" Kenetheus stood and embraced her. "You haven't been found out, and he hasn't noticed the money missing?"

"No, I have taken small amounts each time, and my slaves have saved

denarii when buying things at market. It has added up, though, has it not?" Barbaria paused to give him a firm kiss. She softly stroked the skin on his face next to the new wound, then she ran her hand up through his soft blond hair. "Now we can finally be together."

"Barbaria, your father will never allow it. Even free, I have still been a slave. He will never allow you to lower yourself to my level, not when there are men like that Senator at the games that have so much power and interest in you." As he said it, he pulled her closer, as if his hold on her would keep his words from being the truth.

"Don't say such things, love," Barbaria said with tears making her blue eyes shine in the darkness. "We will figure it out. We will be together no matter what, I promise."

"Dominus, may I have a word?" Kenetheus said with a bow, his eyes fixed on a point just beyond Decius's head.

"Of course, anything for my favorite champion!" Decius looked up with a condescending smile. "How may I be of service?"

The gladiator took a deep breath. "I have been in your service now for four years, and in that time, I have gathered much in the way of denarii and jewels from adoring fans. I wish to finally repurchase my freedom so I may return to my family and farm the land again."

"I'm afraid that's impossible Kenetheus," Decius said. His words implied regret, but his face showed no remorse. "You are worth more to me, dead or alive, in the arena than anything you can pay me." He looked off, apparently lost in thought. "However, I will accept your payment, and we will work out a system that you may go into society sometimes, monitored by my guards of course."

"I will think about your offer, Dominus," Kenetheus replied, his gut knotted and hopes crushed. "Thank you Dominus, may I take your leave?" With a nod from Barbaria's father, he turned and left the study.

Upon his exit, Kenetheus spied a body pressed into the shadows. Knowing it was Barbaria, he approached after making sure no one else was in the area. Her ashen face told him that she had overheard the conversation.

"He's never going to free you, love," Barbaria said, her knees going weak at the realization. Her loving gladiator was as much a doll to be manipulated to her father's wishes as she herself was. Before Kenetheus, she had never really minded her position in life — it was how she was brought up, and she never expected anything different. Kenetheus had taught her what it was like to be loved, cared for, and admired as a person rather than an object. Seeing him in the situation she had been subjected to her whole life hardened her heart toward her father. With sudden clarity, she resolved that something must be done. They both must escape this paltry existence.

“Marcellus, so good of you to come.”

“Thank you Decius,” Marcellus said with a slight bow. “Your message intrigued me. Where is Barbaria? Your note led me to believe she would be here.” His eyes searched the corners of the room, as if she would at any moment step out of the shadows and come to him.

“We will summon her later,” Decius replied. “I wanted to get business out of the way first. Hopefully next time you two meet, it will be as a newly-engaged couple, yes?”

“That is my hope indeed,” Marcellus eagerly smiled. “Your daughter is a beauty and will make a fine ornament on my arm and in my life.” He paused. “Of course, I’m willing to put in a good word for you in the Senate. My bride’s father must be kept happy.”

“Excellent! While you look over these papers, I will have my slave fetch Barbaria.” Decius glanced toward his slave at the door, realizing the man looked agitated. He motioned the slave over.

“Dominus, I am unable to bring the Domina,” the slave whispered nervously in Decius’s ear. “All her clothing is missing from her chambers, and she is nowhere to be found. She is gone.”

As the sun was setting, turning the sky a vibrant orange and the vineyard a shocking shade of green, a woman stared out across her small lot of land. In the distance, she could see a man weaving through the fields in her direction. Even from far away, she could make out his bulging muscles. She knew as he got closer she would see an unassuming face with warm blue eyes that looked at her only with adoration and respect. As she rested her hands on her waist and stomach, now slightly rounded with child, she smiled. She was free.

LAURA WEBBER is in her third year at Iowa State, majoring in marketing with minors in English and advertising. She spends most of her time watching movies and enjoys anything cat-related.